

Teaching Methodology with Easily Available Resources

By Krzysztof Strzemeski

This article explains how selections from the FORUM were incorporated into the author's methodology classes to form a successful 30-hour semester. The pilot course, which had five groups of students studying methodology, concluded with a questionnaire which brought over 60 responses, a vast majority of which were enthusiastic.

The Context of the Project

Towards the end of the two-year methodology course at our teacher training college, students are required to submit a diploma project, consisting of a collection of lesson plans and with the students' own evaluations, which is based on a theoretical discussion of some aspect of teaching. This is a two-semester introduction (two hours/week), to basic concepts, methods, and terminology. Typically, each group included a group of 15 student teachers.

Problem Statement

The 1995/96 academic year was particularly difficult since the college accepted more students than usual and lost a methodology teacher, which resulted in an increased teaching load for the remaining teachers. That year the working conditions were particularly frustrating due to the following factors:

1. There were only a few class sets of methodology books in the college; the majority was available only in one copy.
2. College library hours were inconvenient for the evening students.
3. Students complained of the unavailability of books, the high cost of xerox copies, and the lack of time for reading. They used these complaints as an excuse for doing little.
4. The above-mentioned attitude was reflected in the limited bibliographies of their Diploma Projects. Students always referred to the same well-known sources, making their projects boring for the reviewers. Due to the lack of access to the library, evening students tended to be passive during their classes.

Solution

The situation during the first semester made me think of ways to avoid repeating the same teacher-centered course. How could I make my students partners in the methodology classes

before they were really ready in terms of their competence and performance? How could I make students responsible for the presentation of some teaching ideas and avoid the usual discrepancy between the student performance and the instructor's expectations relating to the choice, content, length, and modality of a presentation? My solution was a semester's worth of work using student presentations based on *English Teaching Forum* articles. In our college the *Forum* is available in multiple copies, can be checked out, and is full of short articles written in accessible language with practical ideas. Why not encourage my students to present teaching ideas tried and described by experienced teachers and use them as stepping stones for students' own reflection and independent research?

Procedure

After the first semester of some more theoretical and teacher-centered ground work, I moved to more specifics. In this case, they reflected the content of a practical methodology textbook explaining how to teach particular skills and their components. I used the following procedure:

1. Make a list of topics reflecting the content of your course.
2. Circulate a list with topics, dates, and slots for students' names and grades for students to complete; the dates of the course will be set, the general topics (e.g., vocabulary teaching) will be suggested by the teacher and the slots for grades will be reserved for the teacher; the choice when and what to present will belong to the students.
3. Announce the following rules:
 - a. Each student must choose three topics and prepare three fifteen-minute presentations.
 - b. Students must cooperate with one another to avoid selecting the same article.
 - c. Presentations are to be practical; after a short introduction (the source is given and some remarks are made) a student is to micro-teach the idea from the article.
4. Show the students where and how to look in the Forum such as the index for appropriate articles.

Some Do's

Obviously, not all your students will understand the procedure. Here are some thoughts to ensure the smooth development of the project:

1. Encourage students to consult with you before their presentations. Offer to copy teaching materials for them.
2. Precede and follow students' presentations with your comments, relate the material to the textbook information, and encourage discussion.
3. Give form and content feedback; give grades.
4. React early and decisively to the breaking of the rules unless, for the rest of the semester, you are prepared to put up with students' preparing the very same articles, reading their presentations from notes, forgetting to prepare a practical illustration, or simply breaking the time limits.

Some Don'ts

1. Never overschedule; to avoid student disappointment when a class is missed, don't reschedule student presentations for more than eighty percent of the available classes. Do not schedule them for more than 3/4 of the available class time when a new topic is introduced, or 4/5 of the time when a topic is continued. The remainder of the time will be filled in by short delays such as by your comments, or by discussion.
2. If students believe the course and examination will be based on the assigned textbook, they may feel insecure when the teacher uses the *Forum* as a basis of study in class. Therefore, use the textbook appropriately to give students security, particularly if your course ends with an exam.
3. Don't forget to have some time fillers handy in case there is more time than expected towards the end of a class due to the absence of a presenter.

The Advantages

From the point of view of students, the format described above had several advantages:

1. It offers the audience a variety of topics, ideas, activities, voices, and stimuli.
2. It gives presenters the freedom of choice and the experience of appearing before a group.
3. It gives many students ideas for diploma projects and classroom teaching practice.
4. It forces students to read and become "experts" in an area and prepares them for more serious library research.
5. It increases student participation and teaches students professional terminology.
6. It is much more fun than a standard class.

For the teacher:

1. It offers a good opportunity for student observation, grading, and the learning of new ideas. (Before this, I never had a chance to see my students in action as I was not involved in practice teaching, and my grades were based solely on students' performance on tests.)
2. It relieves the teacher of a lot of the burden of selection, preparation, and repetition of material.
3. It improves the pacing of a class (a change of activity every 15 minutes).
4. It helps avoid the standard dangers with student presentations (Students don't know where to look, how much to prepare, and how to present).
5. It is generally refreshing.

Criticism

Criticism obtained in a questionnaire (see Footnote 1 below) was limited and mostly came from a group of students preparing for graduation who were busy with their diploma projects and anxious to prepare for their exams. The students complained: "The system did not prepare us for the final exam," "I wasn't able to make notes," "You did not test us." Other criticism resulted from the breaking of some of the rules of do's and don'ts as spelled out above.

Conclusion

What was an experiment of an overworked and frustrated teacher struggling with the constraints of the school and the passivity of the students, turned out to be a successful project. The most tangible results for the students were their improved grades and increased interest. For the teacher, it was the discovery of student talents.

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Footnote 1

The questionnaire also showed that, in preparing for their presentations, most students had spent 1-2 hours looking for the appropriate article, and had browsed through 3-8 articles. Thus, they read an extra 2-3 articles, which I deem a great success especially considering the limitations described above.